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LEADING MILLENNIALS

MOTIVATING AND LEADING MILLENNIAL SERVICE MEMBERS

by

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Biography

      LTC Joanne MacGregor is a 1990 graduate from Eastern Illinois University's ROTC program. She is an Active Duty National Guard officer with over 1800 flight hours in Army rotary wing aircraft and a former Instructor Pilot in the UH-60 Blackhawk. LTC MacGregor has served in a multitude of leadership and staff positions to include, Flight Operations Officer and Instructor Pilot Supervisor for Austin Army Aviation Support Facility, Secretary to the Joint Staff for the Texas National Guard, and Deputy G-1 TXARNG. She commanded a General Support Aviation Battalion in Iraq with over 575 Soldiers and 35 aircraft. LTC MacGregor also commanded an active duty National Guard Recruiting and Retention Battalion for 2 years. Following her commands she served as the Deputy Legislative Liaison Officer and Public Affairs Officer for the Texas Military Forces. She is currently assigned as a student at the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL.

Abstract

This paper examines the cultural/environmental factors that affect today's young adults (Millennials) serving in the U.S. military. These factors may not be readily apparent to Generation X and Y leaders. This paper argues that current military leadership principals are sound, however, the author argues nuanced modifications are recommended to effectively communicate, motivate, and discipline millennial subordinates while maximizing their talents through active and thoughtful professional development.

Introduction

The character of America's Armed Forces is changing. Today, the military's senior leadership consists primarily of the Baby Boomer and Generation X cohorts, while the primary recruitable population consists of a very different generation namely Millennials (also known as Generation Y). The Millennial generation's views on life, work, communication, and relationships are very different from previous generations and the current military culture. To effectively recruit and integrate these potential troops into the military's developing culture, today's leaders must understand what drives Millennials. Leaders must determine the best method to recruit and retain service members while achieving strategic objectives and building a strong military force for the future.

This paper examines the cultural and environmental factors that effect today's young adults (Millennials) serving in the U.S. military that are not always readily apparent to Baby Boomers and Generation X leaders. The paper argues that leadership can and should adapt their interpersonal communications to effectively communicate, motivate, and discipline millennial troops while maximizing their subordinates talents through active and thoughtful professional development.

<u>Generational Differences are Real</u>

Many demographers contend that experiences people have between their teens and mid-20's shape their values and beliefs for the rest of their life. These same values are shared among the cohort and create a common bond that defines the generation.[1] The generational labels given to various age groups within American society are designed to help individuals and organizations understand and market to particular cohorts. First, it's

helpful to understand what the term generation means. Merriam-Webster.com defines

generation as, "a group of individuals, most of whom are the same approximate age,

having similar ideas, problems, attitudes, etc."[2] Generations receive their labels mainly

by market research firms with the exception of the Baby Boomer generation.[3]

The first and only generation to receive a formal label from the government was

the Baby Boomer generation. Post World War II, there was a significant spike in birth

rates. Due to this unusual population boom, the Census Bureau coined the term during

their census in order to describe the unusually high birth rate phenomenon.[4] Since then,

various market research institutions identify the composition of each generational cohort

using a general timeframe. The current military workforce consists of service members

from the following generational groups: Baby Boomers (Boomers), Generation X (GEN

X), and Millennials (Generation Y or Gen Y). A deeper look into each generation in the

workplace will provide some insight into the challenges these generations may face when

working together.

Various authors and institutions break down the generations with minor

differences in time span. For clarity purposes, it should be understood that the

timeframes for defining each generation will vary between research firms and can lead to

discrepancies in the figures between resources and books.   The Baby Boomer cohort

comprises approximately 80 million people generally born between 1946 – 1964.[5] In the

military they predominantly consist of Colonels and above as well as Sergeants Majors.

Described as optimistic, hard working, and socially responsible, this cohort ushered in the

era of the two-income household with both parents working full-time. In addition, this

generation was the first to experience a divorce rate that peaked in the 80's at 50% of all

marriages in the United States. When they entered into the job market they were told the

only way to reach the top of the ladder was by working longer and harder than those

around them. Therefore, this generation was the inspiration for the term "workaholic"

that was coined in the 70's, because in their mind hard work equaled long hours.[6] As a

result, Boomers felt working long hours is expected of them, and a person who doesn't

work long hours is viewed as a second-rate employee. As Boomers moved up the ranks

they valued flexibility and diversity in the workplace. They are the first group to make

decisions based on work groups and committees rather than through autocratic

hierarchy.[7] The Equal Rights Amendment signed in 1972 influenced their positive

perceptions of a diverse workforce going forward. Other major events shaped the

Boomers such as the assassination of John F Kennedy, multiple civil rights movements,

nuclear proliferation, the Vietnam War and the first astronaut walking on the moon.[8]

Due to the advancement of technology and automation in industry, the Boomer

generation also experienced layoffs and downsizing of massive proportions. As a result,

the years of hard work did not pay off as they once thought, so they were forced to

remain in the workforce longer than expected. This led to a trickle down effect for

Generation X who entered the workforce during a recession in the early 90's while

simultaneously competing for jobs against Boomers with much more experience.

The Generation X cohort was born mostly between 1965 and 1980. In the

military they predominantly consist of the Majors up to Colonels and Sergeants First

Class through Sergeants Majors. This generation has a propensity to be independent,

cynical, suspicious of authority, and often seeks closeness with family. Children of

Boomers, were raised in after-school programs or by nannies where their free time was

structured with sports and formal activities. Generation X spent a lot of independent time in front of televisions and computers watching around the clock news with negative media coverage on wars around the world, political and social scandals, murder investigations, and social change.[9] They are products of blended families with complex family lives that include stepparents and half siblings.[10] Because of this, it has shaped the way they view the world as well as interpersonal relationships. Generation X is sandwiched between the much larger Boomer generation who won't nor can't leave the workforce and Millennials who feel entitled. A few major global events that shaped their perceptions include the fall of the Berlin Wall, the crash of the Space Shuttle Challenger, the rise of AIDS, Watergate, as well as the scandal with President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski to name a few. Because Generation X is made up of smallest population at 46 million people, they are often overshadowed and by the Baby Boomers and Millennials.[11]

<u>Who are these Millennials?</u>

A multitude of studies and authors have written books about Millennials describing their demographics, primary behavior drivers, desires, perceptions, expectations etc. In order to gain more context and better frame the argument, we must explore this concept in greater depth.

Every generation holds a distinct set of core beliefs and values that are shaped by life events and experiences. There are a multitude of differing date ranges for the Generation Y cohort but most researchers agree they were born between 1980 and 1996, putting them between the ages of 20 and 35 which is the military's primary workforce and recruiting pool. They comprise approximately 75 million people in today's

workforce and one-third of the United States population. Their total numbers rival that of the Baby Boomer generation, which is why so much research is being done to discover more about them.

The Gen Y upbringing was very different from the hands-off method experienced by Generation X. Instead, parents of Millennials took a child-centric approach to raising their children. They were put into three different categories when describing their home life. "Latchkey" Millennials are those raised by single or divorced parents. They are more independent than their counterparts and learned to entertain themselves by using technology. A second category is the blended family. Because almost 50 percent of marriages end in divorce in America, similar to Generation X, the Gen Y childhood experience is further complicated by multiple parents, half siblings or stepsiblings, and residing in multiple households. All of these family dynamics create even more challenges for this over-scheduled generation.[12] Despite or because of this, parents of Millennials take a more active role in their child's day-to-day lives. So much so, the parents are labeled "helicopter parents" because they hover over all aspects of their lives. Kevin Wheeler, from Global Learning Resources makes an insightful observation of Millennials:

> The most "parented" generation that we have seen. Since birth, these young folks have been protected, chaperoned, coached, and guided by their parents. Rather than shun parental influence, as most Baby Boomers did, they expect and even embrace the close relationship they have with their parents. They look at their parents to guide them in whatever choices they make and often call mom or dad to get their advice on even trivial matters.[13]

The Internet and information technology served as their primary source of learning from birth onward. Because of this, some professionals argue they lack interpersonal communication skills due to the effects social media had by serving as their

primary social outlet. As a result of this social anemia they are often unfairly labeled: autonomous, self absorbed, abrasive, myopic, unfocused, and indifferent. However, there are more accurate adjectives often used to describe Gen Y such as flexible, altruistic, technologically savvy, global citizens, well connected, and goal oriented.[14]

On a positive note, Generation Y has a philanthropic spirit; they like to give back to communities and many feel the need to fight for worthy causes. As a result, they don't hesitate to challenge the status quo and actively work to make the world around them better. Millennials have higher expectations of employers and the work experience they receive on the job, compared to previous generations. At work they expect continuous learning, clearly defined goals, consequential work, and frequent feedback as well as positive reinforcement.   All of this may explain why the US Armed Forces is the number one employer of the Gen Y cohort.[15] With some nuanced adjustments to our leadership style, the Armed Forces has the potential to provide Millennials with a very fulfilling, challenging, and rewarding career.

Meeting the Challenge

Today's senior military leaders predominantly consist of Generation X and to a lesser extent Baby Boomers. Generation X grew up under very different circumstances from the millennial cohort. As mentioned earlier, Generation X is sandwiched between the Baby Boomers and Millennials so they were taught to work long hours, keep their nose to the grindstone, and in due time they will move up the leadership ladder. Conversely, they are being asked to lead a generation that has a propensity to be autonomous, entitled, indifferent, abrasive, needy, and challenge the status quo. While at the same time Gen Y is philanthropic, creative, resourceful, tech savvy, articulate, and

many are well educated.[16]   To top it off, some contend that many Millennials genuinely believe they could do your job without the benefit of twenty years additional experience. So how do we tackle this challenge and incredible opportunity?

Given the ongoing threats we face throughout the world, it is more important now than ever before to have a strong military force that is capable and committed to defending the American way of life. The future military force is evolving along with the global threats therefore leadership must evolve to meet these new challenges and harness the creative potential Gen Y leaders can bring to the fight. Fortunately, there is good news for the Army regarding the retention of Millennial leaders. According to the most recent Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) conducted in 2014, "Fifty-five percent of active component (AC) captains intend to remain in the Army until they are retirement eligible or beyond, which is among the highest percentages observed by CASAL over the past nine years." Although we are the number one employer of Millennials, and recent surveys suggest Millennial leaders in the Army are willing to serve until retirement age, we must continue to adapt our management approach to remain an attractive employer and provide them with quality leadership.

In order to recruit and retain Millennials, the Armed Forces must focus on the following four leadership elements: improve communication, provide motivation, instill discipline through accountability and finally, using all the components above, provide individually tailored professional development strategies.

Improve Communication

Effective communication is an essential element of any successful organization. Many Millennials want an opportunity to make a real contribution and seek meaningful work. To improve our organization, we must provide Millennials with better interpersonal communication skills while stressing to senior leaders the importance of listening and creating open dialogue with subordinates. As previously mentioned, compared to Baby Boomers and many in Generation X, Millennials have grown up with instantaneous access to limitless information from multiple media sources. Their primary method of communication and source for information is the Internet and social media. This can create a void in personal connections and one-on-one mentorship. As a result, Gen Y frequently struggles with face-to-face interpersonal communication. Author Simon Sinek agrees, during a Command Lecture Series, he made a compelling argument suggesting rather than building apps and jumping on the social media bandwagon in order to connect with Gen Y; organizational leaders should avoid indirect communication and opt for personal interaction. With this in mind, an alternative approach for professional military education and leaders is to teach GEN Y how to develop strong interpersonal communication skills.[17] Not only does this foster camaraderie but also it has the potential to build Millennials' self-confidence and rapport with their leaders. Additionally, improved interpersonal communication skills will serve as a means to further integrate Millennials into the military culture.

Senior leaders can both teach Millennials better interpersonal communication skills and learn from them how to use information technology to enhance the organizations performance and maximize productivity.[18] Not only does Gen Y embrace technology but they demand it in their workplace and use the technological tools at their

disposal; They firmly believe in working smarter not harder. Senior leaders can take advantage of GEN Y's knowledge and creativity, which can lead to improved productivity and morale. When it comes to coaching, leaders will benefit by adjusting their communication techniques in order to listen more and have an open dialogue rather than "giving orders". Experts across the board agree, leaders of Gen Y must learn to become active listeners in order to communicate, " …effective managers exhibited the ability to suspend the bias of their own experience. In other words, they started with the Millennial's experience and not their own."[19] Many leaders rely too heavily on their personal experience, given the pace with which our global threats change; their experience may be irrelevant. Sometimes, Millennials experience and ideas may provide leaders with the original thought needed to help solve many of the wicked problems we face today.

We should embrace the positive change brought about by Millennials. They understand how to maximize the resources provided by information technology and can frequently identify efficiencies for the organization.   Boomers or Generation X leaders are often frustrated when subordinates ask too many questions however, this is the way GEN Y learns. Instead of shutting down questions from subordinates, leaders must not view it as a challenge to their authority, instead consider it a chance to build understanding that can lead to positive outcomes. Additionally, senior leaders must mentor Millennials on the proper approach to question plans and directives. It is important for GEN Y to understand the appropriate time and environment to have an open dialogue versus following orders without questions. If dialogue breaks down and

they don't understand the military protocol it will lead to frustration for senior leaders and morale problems for the Millennials.

Ensure Motivation

Millennials are searching for a greater purpose in life beyond money. "According to Gallup, 89 percent of employers believe money is the reason most people leave a job, when in reality only 12 percent leave for more money. This lack of understanding drives organizations to make poor decisions when addressing the growing concerns associated with high turnover."[20] They often turn to family, friends, or leaders to provide inspiration in order to help them define what they want to accomplish in life. The military organization and leaders have an opportunity to provide the inspiration and mentorship Millennials search for. A life of service in the Armed Forces provides a way to serve and be part of something greater. Leadership can highlight this as they recruit and during retention counseling with troops. In fact, the 2014 CASAL can lead one to believe this is already occurring with many leaders. According to the survey, "More than three-fourths of respondents indicate their immediate superior has had a positive or very positive effect on their work quality, motivation and commitment to the Army."[21]

When it comes to motivating GEN Y, the most effective leaders place subordinates in a position where they can grow and stretch their professional abilities without the fear of catastrophic failure. This exposure underscores to Millennials the leadership's willingness to offer more responsibility to those who demonstrate the potential; likewise it highlights the possible need for additional professional development and growth. Conversely, Gen Y is motivated by a leader who leads by example and is personally invested in the professional development of subordinates. "It may sound

cliché, but by setting an example, managers will create an environment in which the mature will adapt. Adapting does not mean acquiescing to the whims of an individual or a generation. Adaptive mangers have the ability to create environments that allow for enough discomfort so that people will feel the need to change but safe enough so that they can change. We think that generational rapport is critical to creating such an environment."[22] Millennials are motivated when they have the latitude to come up with creative solutions to problems. Military leaders must not be afraid to allow subordinates to stray from military tradition when approaching a problem. By doing so, it encourages creativity, teamwork, and can make the organization more effective. Successful managers will adapt their leadership style in order to create a sense of purpose and motivate their team.

The authors of *Managing the Millennials* believe many successful managers use a specific set of core competencies they feel are particularly effective when managing Millennial employees. The competencies fall within three behavioral categories: adapting, communicating and envisioning. They further clarify these competencies by explaining that adapting refers to the leader adapting management policies and style to accommodate the millennial values. With regard to communication, it is specifically referring to making a connection and talking with Gen Y rather than talking at them. Envisioning involves aligning the personal goals of the employee with the goals of the organization, this is considered ideal when motivating and leading employees.[23]

Teach Discipline and Hold Them Accountable

Discipline for Millennials takes two forms: instill discipline in their professional work habits and hold them accountable for their actions when necessary. Because this

generation was raised to believe they are virtually without personal fault and instant gratification is part of every day life, they risk not understanding the importance of many attributes and behaviors the military considers essential. I argue, professional military training and education must continue to instill discipline and challenge new recruits to grow personally and professionally.

Army Regulation 600-20 states the following with regard to discipline,

> "Military discipline is founded upon self-discipline, respect for properly constituted authority, and the embracing of the professional Army ethic with its supporting individual values. Military discipline will be developed by individual and group training to create a mental attitude resulting in proper conduct and prompt obedience to lawful military authority."[24]

The goal is to ingrain military discipline in troops through continuous training to ensure compliance to orders and build team cohesion. This is the bedrock of military service and it's what drives men and women to risk their lives for their fellow comrades and their country. Millennials are looking for knowledge and relevance. A career in the Armed Services instills self-discipline and military values in Millennials who want to make a difference and take pride in their work. Millennials recognize to some extent that discipline will further their professional growth and development as a leader. The training and discipline the military services inculcate in various training programs is designed to bolster self-confidence and self-discipline, something this generation desperately needs.

Additionally, there are many who believe Millennials lack resilience when it comes to negative feedback and accountability. However, there are others like me who believe if they are coached properly they will welcome the feedback and accountability as an essential element of their continued growth and professional development. Lindsey Pollak, a Millennial workplace expert agrees, "Developing a coaching mentality

doesn't mean you can't manage young people with discipline, high standards and competitiveness. What it means is that you approach the process as a supporter, mentor and teacher, not an adversary."[25]

When it becomes necessary to discipline Gen Y service members, it must be conducted in a manner that explains and emphasizes the specific unsatisfactory behavior or failed goal but also encourages continuous improvement and professional growth. I agree with Pollak's assertion regarding the effectiveness of coaching GEN Y,

> "Coaches are in the business of improving their coachees, and numerous surveys report that training and personal development are Millennials' top motivators and retention drivers. When you position negative feedback as an opportunity for self-development, Millennials are more likely to listen and respond – and stay with your organization as they improve."[26]

Because they are sensitive to personal critique, therefore, concerted effort must be made to provide thoughtful specific feedback of the unsatisfactory behavior or event, and the corrective action required on their part.

Development

Developing subordinates has been one of the Army's leadership challenges for several years. The 2014 CASAL validates the fact that this problem still exists,

> "All assessed areas of mission command and leadership are rated favorably with one persistent exception – *developing others*. One in five leaders do not receive performance counseling; about half receive formal or informal performance counseling too infrequently and do not agree it is effective; more than half receive informal performance feedback occasionally or less often; and nearly half do not have a mentor. These indicators point to a shortcoming in development practices."[27]

It is important for leaders to understand they are charged with creating a work environment where people receive regular feedback and are provided with the tools to excel in their job. Leaders too often see counseling and subordinate development as a

task that must be performed rather than the most important responsibility they have as a senior leader.

Millennials are perpetual students who seek opportunities for continuous learning regarding formal education. With this in mind, it is no surprise the recent CASAL identified an area of improvement in our professional military education. When queried regarding the various military professional education curriculum, only 52% of recent AC course graduates rated the courses as effective for improving leadership capabilities, only the Warrior Leader Course reaches the two-thirds level for improving leadership. The ratings were similarly low regarding the learning challenge presented by the course, the relevance of course content to graduates' next duties, and the effectiveness of the course for improving leadership.[28]

Bruce Tulgan takes a different point of view regarding managing Millennials. He contends that Millennials look for managers to provide them with specific guidance and expectations for successful performance. In return Millennials like to know what they will receive if they meet or exceed those expectations. He goes on to emphasize that it is important to set ground rules up front, a majority of Gen Y employees do not pick up on unspoken expectations about appropriate behavior in the workplace therefore managers must communicate exactly what is expected of the employee.[29] Inappropriate behavior such as poor work ethic, tardiness, and challenging authority in the workplace is commonly understood by baby boomers but not often for many Gen Y employees. Managers should be prepared to discuss work expectations without emotion and provide tangible goals and benchmarks for success. When it comes to feedback, Tulgan

recommends the open and direct approach. With some minor adjustments this fits well with the military leadership style.

Millennials themselves can help Boomers and Generation X leaders understand our junior service members. Company grade leaders in the military often act as a bridge for the senior leaders when dealing with the enlisted generational gap. John Grubbs, in his book "Leading The Lazy", dedicates a chapter on the topic of Millennials in a leadership role. He asserts the Gen Y leadership potential is tremendous for several reasons. First, Millennials have not worked long enough to adopt a critical leadership style often found in the Baby Boomer generation, therefore they are more positive, optimistic, willing to listen, and less likely to demonstrate toxic leadership habits. Second, they are bright, articulate, well read and enthusiastic about the opportunity to lead and they are willing to speak their mind and challenge the status quo.[30] These qualities are attractive to their generational cohort and can lead to a synergistic work environment. Grubbs makes several compelling observations about how Millennials upbringing has shaped them as employees and leaders. One of these observations contends that because Gen Y has never experienced a "tough love" environment growing up, as such, they are less likely to demonstrate a "tough love" leadership style. Grubbs goes on to explain how Millennials have little interest in past history. Because of their experience with the rapidly changing information age, they really have little use with "this is how we did it in the past". This mindset provides a blank canvas for innovation that will be attractive to millennial employees. Finally, Grubbs points out that Millennial supervisors have little interest in punching the time clock and monitoring employees attendance because they are far more interested in the results they produce.[31] He makes a

compelling argument for hiring and promoting Millennials into leadership roles and then provide them with the latitude to innovate and lead their team without micromanaging them too much. I would also add, if Gen Y leaders know the goals, expectations, and boundaries they are more likely to manage within those boundaries while simultaneously building a highly effective team.

Conclusion

Understanding where, or more importantly how, Millennials were raised is a key component to understanding the whole of the generation. The ways and means of upbringing have changed significantly over the past 30 to 40 years. If the U.S. Military hopes to successfully integrate the Millennial generation into the ranks and get the most out of what they have to offer it will have to change and adapt to methods of communications that are effective with Millennials. Further, U.S. Military leaders must modify the means of interaction and mentoring with this cohort. Importantly, this generation brings new perspectives and skills to the fight and are simply not accustomed to the way Baby Boomers, and even Generation X, interact in the workplace. Mentoring must be an integral part of their integration process and when discipline is required care must be taken not to associate a deficiency with the individual since personal criticism is rarely received well by Millennials. Instead, provide the feedback necessary to improve performance while providing encouragement in the process.

As society evolves, so must the military. Today's military is multi-faceted and requires the ability to multi-task, work as part of a group, and incorporate information from multiple sources. These are all areas in which Millennials are well suited to add value to the organization and senior leadership. This, coupled with Gen Y's sense of

community service, makes military service a good match for Millennials. If military leaders work to improve their understanding of the Millennial generation and develop the leadership skills necessary to fully exploit their immense potential, characteristics viewed as leadership challenges will become opportunities for recruitment, retention and enhanced performance of potentially our greatest generation.

Notes

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